

Columbia Pro Cantare Program Notes

Mozart's Requiem

Elam Ray Sprenkle

In 1798, Constanze, Mozart's widow, relates in a chronicle an extraordinary tale concerning a mysterious commission given her husband for a Requiem Mass. In that same year, Fredrich Rochlits published his Mozart anecdotes, based largely –though not exclusively – on information Constanze had provided. This second version does not square with the first, but did provide more in the way of detail, especially Mozart's frame of mind as he composed the work. "His (Mozart's) interest in the affair grew with every bar," writes Rochlitz, describing Mozart as "certain that he was writing this piece for his own funeral." Constanze claimed that Mozart "could not be dissuaded from this idea; he worked, therefore like Raphael on his *Transfiguration*, with the omnipresent feeling of his approaching death and delivered, like the latter, his own transfiguration." Thus was born the legend. We know better today and those interested in the story as modern scholarship has reconstructed it, are advised to read Robbins Landon's *Mozart's Last Year* for a better understanding of just what it was that led to Mozart's final project.

That Mozart did not live to finish the *Requiem* is, of course, true. The score was eventually completed by Franz Xavier Sussmayr, a student of Mozart's and, curiously, by Mozart's own testimony, a second rater at that. How Sussmayr found himself in such a position is the stuff of scholarly detective work, but there is no gothic mystery here, the film *Amadeus* aside. Before his death, Mozart had composed vast stretches of the score, had called in friends to read through portions on more than one occasion, and had no doubt given instructions on how the remainder was to proceed. The real puzzle is how genius works.

Mozart's *Requiem* begins the modern genre. We do not perform the hundreds written before his and here the questions might also properly begin. For centuries, composers had written Missae de Profundis, and yet most of these are ignored in our time. Perhaps we can no longer engage the sensibilities of eras too far removed from our own. With Mozart, however, the species comes alive for contemporary man, followed as it is with versions by Berlioz, Verdi, Brahms, Faure, and in recent years, Lloyd Weber. Of these, Mozart's alone is orthodox, the composer following time-honored conventions.

Berlioz asked for a cast of thousands to accomplish his heaven-storming task, forces so incomprehensible that one asks for whom we mourn. Brahms, likewise, offers an original based on the construction of his own text. Verdi, as everyone knows, wrote an opera instead of a Requiem; at any moment one expects Rigoletto to make an appearance, and Faure's interpretation takes us away from the "day of wrath." Again, of these canonic scores, Mozart's alone honors the grand tradition. The formal Catholic text is set in its entirety.

And yet for all of that, Mozart was able to breathe the spirit of the individual into his masterpiece. Though no less overwhelming than Berlioz's, Mozart's vision of judgment is accomplished in more human, more intimate ways. There is likewise no allusion to the opera stage. Mozart gives us a work in the tradition of oratorio, a sacred design. A dissident view (Brahms) is additionally ignored, for the Catholic Mozart was an active church musician all of his life, and his works are filled with items written to the greater glory of God. (In Mozart's last year

he was appointed *Kapellmeister* at St. Steven's Cathedral, a post he had pursued since his arrival in Vienna. He also composed the *Ave verum corpus*, a piece of music that comes as close to the unutterable as any ever written.) As for Faure and the French school at the end of the nineteenth century, there could be no greater contrast. Mozart looked death in the face. He did not write of paradise. His *Requiem* ends as it begins, the emptiness of the concluding harmony as final reminder. But in between the urgent stretches of polyphony that open and close his *Requiem*, Mozart offers us some of his sweetest moments, at once ceremonial and yet always nuanced, sometimes pleading, but always convinced of better things to come. A final note with regard to Mozart's last work is that it was written at the moment when enlightened Europe had spilled over into revolution. Mozart, whose sense of the *Zeitgeist* was as sure as any other's, transcended the strife. In his *Requiem* he went straight to the Godhead.